How organizations can aspire to lifelong learning

From product to process

There are many barriers to workplace learning, and in some organizations it never really takes place at all. Against this background, lifelong learning remains something of an ideal. That does not have to be the case, however, because a broader view of what constitutes learning can significantly increase the possibility of its realization.

Work and labor

Many companies truly believe that the policies they have in place encourage workplace learning to occur. After all, everyone likes to think that their way is the best. In many cases, however, the reality is much different. The prevailing structures merely serve to sustain power relations that create tensions, suspicions and conflicts. The outcome? An organizational culture that conspires to suppress any real desire to learn.

And that is not all. The fact that work is often regarded as something to endure rather than enjoy clearly does not help either. Some theorists term this “labor”, rather than work. While the two are generally viewed as being interchangeable, it is not the case here. Founded in Marxist terminology, “labor” evokes negative connotations of an alienated workforce being exploited or controlled by its working environment. Such workers are required to perform mundane tasks that demand only basic physical or mental prowess. At best, work is simply something they get paid to do. The scope for learning is clearly very narrow here because workers gain little or no satisfaction from what they are doing. This is an important point because satisfaction is a must if any learning is to take place.

The same theorists believe that “work” becomes distinct from labor when it is varied and stimulating enough to enable the development of manual, academic or psychological skills. When this happens, workers can acquire an aptitude for applying judgment beyond the immediate activity or situation. Of course, some tasks will always be humdrum. It would be foolish of anyone to believe otherwise. But to facilitate learning, organizations should obviously strive at every opportunity to promote work rather than labor.

On the evidence of a study carried out in Australia, placing some emphasis on employee development is clearly a wise move. The survey aimed to discover the factors that made work a positive experience and 29 percent of those questioned were most content when they felt that their work was interesting and satisfying. While the survey obviously cannot be

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regarded as conclusive, it does suggest that ultimate job satisfaction is not really dependent on the level of pay and benefits received.

The stigma of being a learner

Since 26 percent of respondents placed considerable value on interaction and getting on with their colleagues, the survey also indicated that work is regarded as an important social activity. This finding perhaps questions the merits of traditional views of learning, where the focus is almost entirely on the individual.

In the workplace, this can even cause problems. There is supposed safety in numbers and no one likes to be singled out as being different from the crowd. However, classifying someone as a learner does just this and can give rise to feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. The individual concerned will usually then be desperate to become competent as quickly as possible in order to escape the stigma, improve their standing and earn the respect of others. What is wrong with that? Well, one potential drawback is that the individual will only strive to acquire the necessary knowledge needed to shed his or her learner status. That this scenario is far from uncommon clearly advocates broader group or organizational learning as being more appropriate and beneficial. Ironically, though, the term “learning” does not usually carry the same baggage.

Product and process

The established perception of learning has further implications as far as lifelong learning is concerned. In effect, the mind becomes a container to be filled with discrete learning blocks as and when required. Learning is thus recognized as being the product of the activity rather than the process. The view holds that learning is constant and replicable and therefore appropriate for direct comparison of different test and examination results. Perhaps so. But on each occasion that learning takes place, it only has true relevance to its immediate context. It is thus akin to someone finding the solutions to a series of problems, while never becoming aware of any underlying concepts that connect them. Because of this, the learner has to work out each answer separately instead of saving time by simply applying the relevant concept. You might even argue that the learner becomes little more than a circus animal trained to jump through certain hoops. Change the hoop in some way and the animal immediately becomes confused.

Lifelong learning implies continuity, which clearly is not the case here. In the rapidly evolving business world, this raises some important questions. How do we respond to unfamiliar situations? How do we resolve future problems? After all, an organization striving to sustain competitive advantage must not only meet today’s challenges, but also those that emerge tomorrow, the day after and the day after that. So what can be done?

The solution possibly lies in adopting a broader perception of learning that incorporates both product and process. In other words, not only what has been learned, but also the act of learning itself. This is crucial, as it is the process of learning that will accelerate development and allow learning to acquire significance beyond the here and now. It is also important to incorporate the contextual and cultural background of where learning has taken place instead of viewing all learning as being independent of such factors. This paves the way for learning to be perceived as a two-way process that is mutually beneficial to both learner and environment alike. In an organization able to boast a loyal and satisfied workforce, the potential pay off from this cannot be underestimated.
Some practical suggestions from the above

- Develop and support a workplace culture within which learning can thrive.
- Stimulate and challenge your employees by making their work as varied and interesting as possible.
- Focus mainly on group or organizational learning rather than on the individual.
- Do not just consider the measurable products or outcomes of learning. In the grander scheme of things, the learning process itself is much more important.

Comment

The review is based on: “Lifelong learning in the workplace? Challenges and issues,” by Paul Hager. The author sets out to discuss issues surrounding lifelong learning in the workplace but loses his focus and ends up mainly concentrating on defining the concept of learning itself. The article is largely complex and theoretical, and employs a style that reflects this.

Reference